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Interview with George Cotkin

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George Cotkin

INTERVIEW WITH GEORGE COTKIN

Professor of History

Dr. George Cotkin has taught in the History Department at Cal Poly since 1980. A former Fulbright Scholar and recipient of a National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship, Cotkin received Cal Poly's Distinguished Teaching Award in 1989. He is the author of four books, including *Existential America* and the just-released *Morality's Muddy Waters: Ethical Quandaries in Modern America*, in which he explores how morality and history intersect. He has just completed the manuscript for a new book, *Dive Deeper: Journeys with Moby-Dick*.

Mobius: Does one need an existential awareness to become engaged in controversy?

GC: It's helpful, but defining oneself as an existentialist doesn't necessarily lead to activism, nor ensure that an individual develop an "authentic" self. I wrote in my previous book, *Existential America*, that existentialism is not concerned solely with the nature of Being but with the possibility of Becoming—Becoming occurs not in an orgy of ease or self-realization therapeutics, but at the cost of constant struggle with the nothingness and absurdity inherent in the human condition.

Mobius: What notable campus controversies have you witnessed at Cal Poly?

GC: I came to campus after the Vietnam and Watergate protests. My understanding is that there was, in general, acquiescence in regard to those events on campus, as reflected in the fact that then-governor Ronald Regan could appear at Cal Poly with relatively little concern that he would be met by protestors.

Later, during the early 80's, there was campus and student opposition to Diablo Canyon, along with political activism aimed at the situations in Nicaragua and El Salvador. The campus branch of CISPES* held teach-ins and hosted speakers.

After that, there was a general downturn in campus activism during the late 1980's, perhaps in response, in part, to the break-up of the Soviet Union. I do recall, however, some political activity around various state ballot initiatives, such as Prop. 209 [which was passed in 1996 and prohibited public institutions from considering race, sex, or ethnicity in admissions or hiring] and the Hinkle incident in 2002.

Recently, there has been less activism at Cal Poly on the issue of budget cuts than at UC campuses. My sense is that students here are dissatisfied with the situation, but not enough to jell into political action.

[*The Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador, CISPES, was founded in 1980 in opposition to the U.S. support of the Salvadoran military and government during the Savadoran civil war.]

Mobius: What has been your own engagement with controversy?

GC: Twenty years ago I helped establish CISPES on campus; I organized demonstrations and brought speakers. Then, I had not exactly a crisis of faith, but I began to be taken aback by how a good lecturer could sway student opinion and influence student action. I wanted classroom discussions to be more open-ended, to allow for more diverse opinion and debate.

I guess I've channeled my activism into my scholarship. My current book, *Morality's Muddy Waters*, began the moment I walked out of the film "Hotel Rwanda." I was so affected by the movie, I began to write a book about individuals who had looked into the abyss of evil, such as Gita Sereny, who interviewed the Nazi commandant of the Treblinka extermination camp, and Iris Chang, who wrote an account of the Nanking Massacre and later committed suicide. But, frankly, I found this subject too depressing.

Instead, I began to consider how morality and history intersect. Can historical narratives help to illuminate moral problems? Can moral categories help us to understand history better? What are the dangers and benefits from thinking morally about historical actors and actions? Can morality be viewed as a process of thinking rather than one of judging? Some of these questions define my History 304 seminar, "Morality and History," as the students and I look at bombing (conventional and atomic), the potential for our "understanding" evil and its value for historical analysis, and the challenges of historical understanding, in general, especially in the light of postmodernist claims.

The book attempts to address these issues. Was the use of the atomic bomb inevitable? Might "mature consideration" have made wartime decisions more palatable as a process? Another chapter looks at how Hannah Arendt dealt with the challenge of evil, especially as personified in totalitarianism and recent history. How has the concept of evil changed over time? In contrast to the postwar years, when evil was something both internal and external to the individual, we have moved to the present when we seem to have a rather narrower notion of evil as something external to us. In another chapter, I consider the power of empathy as a moral value through the work of John Howard Griffin, a white man who became briefly a "Negro" to experience racism in the south. Another chapter examines the breakdown of compassion and character involved in the massacre at My Lai (during the Vietnam war). What were the morals that the young soldiers carried with them, and how were they unpacked during the war?

Mobius: In your book Existential America you note that Camus, Sartre, and de Beauvoir, the Big Three of Existentialism, decreed that American confidence, swagger, optimism—our lack of remorse—mitigated against an American existentialism. This observation seems to prevail at Cal Poly, given the relative lack of political action on campus. Are Cal Poly students just too comfortable to engage controversy with direct action?

GC: I sense that Cal Poly students have grown more liberal; even the theology of students who identify as Christians are more oriented toward service, rather than Republicanism. Their actions are directed locally. I know students, for instance, who are involved in projects such as homelessness. Of course, twenty years ago, the issues lent themselves to more to direct action—shutting down Diablo Canyon, for instance. Today, we're experiencing a general malaise, and we have no sure sense of how to take action.

Möbius: Some would say that as a place of open inquiry, the university should not only allow but also encourage debate. Indeed, engagement with controversy and social-intellectual argument is important to the growth of students, as they begin to define their own moral compasses. How do you view the role of the university in confronting controversy? From your perspective, what does Cal Poly do to either encourage or discourage controversy?

GC: All institutions tend toward conservatism and conformity, so you can't expect Cal Poly to push for activism, although one has a sense of a general dismay on campus in response to the Michael Pollan situation [in which Cal Poly donor Harris Ranch threatened to pull donations from Cal Poly if the university hosted a lecture from sustainable food advocate Michael Pollan without also including spokespersons from conventional "Big Agriculture" in the event. The university changed the event into a panel discussion].

Möbius: If young people are no longer embracing existentialism, no longer facing finitude as a result of war and a draft, what are the current ideas that might influence them to commit to an ideal, to undertake critical action or even rebellion?

GC: There is still the human condition that can incite action, but most of our fingers aren't rubbing against that sore. On the other hand, our current students comprise the first generation that doesn't have the expectation of doing as well materially as their parents. And the large problems, such as health and climate change, may push aside their quietude. What is necessary to activism is a sense of solidarity with a group, a sense of necessity, and some occasional successes. ☺

Interview on behalf of Möbius conducted by Amy Hewes, Winter 2010.